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Author(s): Alice M. Lowery

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# The Odyssey as Archetype

Alice M. Lowery

Department of English  
Georgia Southwestern College  
Americus, Georgia

ALL this talk about relevancy has undoubtedly caused a great deal of soul searching on the part of many English teachers as to whether established literary classics such as *The Odyssey* can be made meaningful for our high school students. True, *The Odyssey* and other classics are important parts of our Western cultural heritage, but is this a sufficient reason for including them in the high school English curriculum? I would say that it is not, but would like to suggest what I do consider to be a significant and compelling reason for teaching *The Odyssey* in high school. Perhaps more than any other work, *The Odyssey* is a powerful and simple expression of two fundamental archetypal themes: initiation and man's search for his own identity and for meaning in life.

The first of the two archetypal themes, the initiation theme, centers around the growing up of Telemachus. If you will recall the situation at the beginning of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus has been gone from Ithaca for almost eighteen years and for the last four of these years Penelope has been trying to fend off the suitors. During this time

Telemachus has been in a situation which all young people would appreciate—he has been surrounded by the adult world. He has not as yet been allowed to make any decisions concerning matters in Ithaca although it is his inheritance the suitors are squandering, nor has he as yet assumed any responsibility for his own future. But during the fourth year when the suitors learn of Penelope's scheme to delay selecting a husband and when things have pretty much reached a crisis, something very significant happens to Telemachus. Athene, the Greek goddess of wisdom, appears to him disguised as Mentos, an old friend of Odysseus. The sole reason for Athene's visit to Telemachus seems to be to encourage him to go out and search for his father and to call an assembly of the wooers at which he will announce his plans in an attempt to get help outfitting a ship for the trip. What is remarkable about Athene's visit is that when the goddess leaves, Telemachus is a very different young man—he has begun the process of growing up. In fact, we might say that Athene is an external manifestation of what is happening to Telemachus internally.

EVERYONE around Telemachus is aware that something has happened to him, that he is not the child he used to be. For example, immediately after the departure of the goddess, the young man rebukes his mother saying, "Howbeit go to thy chamber and mind thine own housewiferies, the loom and distaff, and bid thy handmaids ply their tasks. But speech shall be for men, for all, but for me in chief; for mine is the lordship in the house." Penelope's reaction to this "wise" saying of her son is amazement, signifying that this is a new kind of behavior for Telemachus. And then later, when Telemachus addresses the suitors, calling for an assembly, the suitors are also amazed at the change in him. As Homer describes it, "So spake he, and all that heard him bit their lips and marvelled at Telemachus, in that he spake boldly. . . ."

There is no advice Athene could have given Telemachus which could have been any more significant as far as illustrating his new role than that of calling an assembly since the assembly, where major decisions are reached, is recognized by the Greeks as the hallmark of a civilized and ordered world. (One of the first indications that the Cyclops are not a civilized society is Odysseus' observation that these people do not have "law-giving" assemblies.) When *The Odyssey* opens, there has been no assembly in Ithaca for almost eighteen years, and Telemachus, in his new manhood, is about to preside over one, an event which is indicative of a new order in Ithaca.

Telemachus bravely presents his newly formed plans to the assembly, but the wooers rebuke him and for a moment he almost falters, as would any young man who faced that kind of formidable opposition just as he was beginning to confront the adult world. Athene, however, appears again and this time Telemachus is left with sufficient courage to stand up to the suitors and

proclaim his manhood. "Is it a little thing, ye wooers, that in time past ye wasted many good things of my getting, while as yet I was a child? But *now that I am a man grown . . .*," he says.

WHY does Athene send Telemachus to search for his father? The search does not have any effect on the outcome of the epic. Odysseus would have returned home in any case, as this had previously been "fated" by the gods. The answer must lie, I think, in what Athene believed the journey would do for Telemachus. On a very literal level, Athene probably recognized that Telemachus was in danger and needed to be sent away for his own safety. Although Athene never mentions this in her conversations with Zeus, we do know that the suitors plot to kill Telemachus as he returns from Sparta. On another level, however, Athene wants Telemachus to take responsibility for the future of his father's house on himself, to devise a way to rid Ithaca of the suitors should he learn that his father is dead, and also to go out into the world. Both of these, taking responsibility and experiencing the world, are important parts of growing up. Eurycleia, the very practical nurse, cannot understand Telemachus' need for the journey and tries to dissuade him from going, but Telemachus' need is very real, just as is every adolescent's need to break away from authority and to assume responsibility for his own life. So at the end of Book I, we find Telemachus "meditating in his heart upon the journey that Athene had showed him," the very literal journey to Sparta and Pylos and the archetypal journey from the world of childhood and innocence to that of adulthood and experience.

The culmination of this archetypal journey of Telemachus comes in the last part of *The Odyssey*, when father and son are united and Telemachus helps his father overthrow the suitors.

Earlier, in the first part of *The Odyssey*, Telemachus remarks to the disguised Athene that he does not know if he is his father's son, "My mother verily saith that I am his; for myself I know not, for never man yet knew of himself his own descent," meaning, I think, not only that he has not seen his father since childhood, but also that he has not as yet acquired those virtues of courage, strength, and cunning which would truly make him his father's son. In the last episode, however, Telemachus shows that he has acquired these virtues at last and has come into the full estate of his manhood. Odysseus has devised a plan to slay the suitors which involves a contest to string Odysseus' mighty bow and shoot an arrow through a line of ax handles. The plan has been carefully formulated to allow Odysseus to catch the suitors off guard and to provide the element of surprise he needs to overpower the suitors against such great odds. The plan is almost spoiled, however, when Telemachus, in what is final evidence of his coming of age, almost manages to string the bow even when the strongest of the wooers, Eury-machus and Antinous, are unable to do so. Telemachus tries three times to string the bow and on the fourth try would have succeeded had not his father stopped him with a glance. It was necessary for Odysseus to stop Telemachus in order that the plan not be spoiled, but this does not take away from this final, outward manifestation of the young man's manhood.

THE second archetypal theme in *The Odyssey*, man's search for his own identity, his attempt to answer the question "Who am I?" is illustrated by Odysseus. Psychologists tell us that we cannot know ourselves in isolation; we know ourselves only in relation to other people and to our environment, and this accounts, I think, for man's continual need to experience his environment. Sol-

itary confinement has long been considered a severe punishment because in solitary confinement, after a period of isolation from other men and from a varied environment, a man is quite literally stripped of his identity. Prisoners of war have regularly been subjected to this type of treatment as a means of "breaking" them. At the beginning of *The Odyssey*, Calypso is keeping Odysseus in a kind of solitary confinement, and even though the very human Odysseus was at first attracted to the sensual goddess, he too begins to break and by the time *The Odyssey* opens in the eighth year of his confinement, Odysseus sits "weeping on the shore even as aforetime, straining his soul with tears and groans and griefs."

It is no accident, I think, that Ogygia, the island of the beautiful goddess Calypso, is so closely associated with the womb and Odysseus the man waiting to be born. The island is described as "a sea-girt isle where is the navel of the sea," and Calypso has promised Odysseus that he would "know not death and age forever" if he would remain with her, his life then becoming like the limbo of the unborn child. Calypso can't understand why Odysseus should want to leave her; she has already warned him of the suffering he will have to endure if he leaves her. But for Odysseus the psychological need to reestablish his identity is as real as was Telemachus' need to leave his sheltered life to go out and experience life. Such archetypal interpretation as this points up the fittingness of opening the epic with this episode.

Throughout this journey Odysseus is much concerned with his identity. In fact, Odysseus' preoccupation with maintaining his identity and his anguish at having to forfeit his identity on two occasions provide a strong case for the argument that, at least on one level, Odysseus leaves Calypso in order not to lose his self identity, becoming, as

he does, Everyman in search of himself. The two occasions where Odysseus is forced to conceal his identity, the Cyclops episode and the return to Ithaca, clearly illustrate Odysseus' concern with keeping his identity. In the Cyclops episode, Odysseus develops a clever ruse to allow himself and his men to escape from the one-eyed giant. When Polyphemus asked Odysseus his name, Odysseus replies that it is "Noman" and later, when Polyphemus is screaming for help and the other Cyclops inquire as to who has harmed him, Polyphemus replies "Noman." Assuming, then, that it is the gods who have brought this trouble upon Polyphemus, the giant's brothers depart without offering him any assistance. Thus Odysseus escapes unharmed. When he finally reaches Ithaca, Odysseus is once again forced to disguise himself, according to a plan that has been worked out by Athene to enable Odysseus to test the loyalty of his family and friends and to enable him to have the element of surprise as an advantage over the suitors when the plan for destroying them comes to fruition. It is interesting to note that in both episodes the universe is depicted as disordered and inverted. The world of the Cyclops serves as a parallel to what the world of Ithaca has become since Odysseus has been gone. But just as Odysseus makes certain that Polyphemus knows his true identity before he sails from the Cyclops island, so Odysseus returns home to a world which, for the most part, no longer remembers him, asserts his identity, and thus sets the world to rights. When Odysseus finally and gloriously reveals himself to all of Ithaca, he says that "this terrible trial, has ended at last," and this terrible trial has been as much the necessity to hide his identity as all the indignities he has had to endure.

**O**DYSSEUS' experiencing of the world around him is an important part of his search for his identity. Just

as a child relates to his environment through all his senses and grows as a result, so Odysseus relates to his environment and grows as a person. The importance of this "experience" theme is evident in Homer's announcement of the theme when he says of Odysseus, "many were the men whose towns he saw and whose mind he learnt." This need for inquiring into the nature of things gets Odysseus into trouble time and again as he makes forays onto the various islands, but Homer presents it as one of his most admirable qualities. At least three of the dangers Odysseus encounters are dangers precisely because of what they would do for this desire of man to experience the world around him. The Lotus-Eaters offer men forgetfulness of the hard world; Circe dulls their senses and thus their ability to perceive; the Sirens offer knowledge without experience, a deceptive trap. But from the Calypso episode on, Odysseus is drawn back by the "things of this world" and is able to resist temptation.

When Athene makes her plans to send Odysseus home from the island of Calypso, she says that he will go home with more wealth than if he had taken all his spoils of Troy directly home from the war. And so he does. His wealth is that of experience gained and knowledge, both of his environment and himself, won.

The two narratives of *The Odyssey*, the journey of Telemachus as he grows up and the journey of Odysseus as he searches for himself, which are seemingly unrelated throughout the epic, come together at the conclusion as father and son join forces. Symbolically, the two narratives can also be seen as interrelated. Leaving the world of innocence for the world of experience and searching the world of experience until one finds his place in that world together constitute the *Odyssey* itself—the journey through life.